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ABSTRACT

Designed for all persons who conduct classes and for staff, administrators, and students, this booklet lays out guidelines for nonsexist communication. The booklet, intended both to raise consciousness about how sexist communication looks and sounds and to suggest nonsexist alternatives, is composed of four main sections. The first section contains the guidelines, and covers pronouns, nouns, verbs, and adjectives; how to handle sexist quotations; work-related titles; and courtesy titles. The second section offers additional guidelines for nonsexist communication in the classroom and elsewhere in the university community. Additional guidelines for nonsexist communication in visuals are dealt with in the third section; while the fourth section covers recommendations for raising awareness throughout the university community. An 8-item bibliography concludes the booklet. (SR)

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Guidelines for Nonsexist Communication

Youngstown State University

prepared by

The Special Task Force on
Sexism in Communication

June 1988
(Revised 12 88)

Preface

As the Special Task Force on Sexism in Communication debated the guidelines and discussed the issues raised in this booklet, we came to a greater understanding of our own attitudes and a greater respect for the attitudes of others. Like some members of the task force, you may feel that some of the guidelines are too strong. Like other members, you may feel that the guidelines do not go far enough. We do not expect you to agree with every suggestion, nor will every suggestion be appropriate for every situation.

As a task force, we did not let our individual differences keep us from taking the issue of sexism in communication seriously. We hope that you, too, will discuss the guidelines, air your differences, and treat the issue of sexist communication with the seriousness it deserves.

Bege K. Bowers
Chair

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Introduction

People communicate in a number of ways, including the spoken and written word, tone of voice, behavior, body language, and visual illustrations. Whether people are consciously or unconsciously sexist, their communication may be sexist.

Sexist communication is *any* communication that discriminates on the basis of sex or sexual preferences; ignores, demeans, trivializes, or denigrates one sex or the other; and/or conveys stereotypes based on gender (e.g., the assumptions that lawyers, doctors, administrators, and engineers are male, nurses and teachers are female, men are unfeeling, women aren't good in math, etc.). It includes but is not limited to the use of terms such as *he* and *man* to refer to people of both sexes.

Whether conscious or unconscious, subtle or overt, sexist communication has serious, pervasive, and cumulative effects. It may

- devalue the ideas, work, and words of particular individuals or groups (traditionally women);
- unfairly single out, exclude, ignore, or discount individuals on the basis of sex;
- establish, reinforce, or perpetuate one set of accepted behaviors or expectations for women and another for men; and
- limit abilities (or perception of abilities), opportunities (or perception of opportunities), personal goals, and career directions, thus impeding an individual's personal, academic, and/or professional development.

In short, sexist communication perpetuates social and educational injustices. Like sexism, sexual harassment, and other forms of biased communication—communication that discriminates on the basis of race, age, physical or mental ability—it must not be tolerated. We have an opportunity—and an obligation—as members of the educational community to help students and colleagues shake off unconsidered notions about the world, about other people, and about themselves. We cannot do this, however, without first discarding a few of own old habits of mind and speech, among them the sexism that is built into our culture and language.

The Task Force on Sexism in Communication was established to address the problem of sexist language and attitudes at Youngstown State University. We offer the following guidelines for all persons who conduct classes and for staff, administrators, and students at YSU.

Guidelines

The following guidelines are intended both to raise consciousness about how sexist communication looks and sounds and to suggest nonsexist alternatives. Not every alternative will fit every situation; choose an alternative that is appropriate for your context.

PRONOUNS

In place of the so-called generic *he* or *his*, use an alternative such as the following:

1. Address your reader. Use second person (*you*).
Sexist: *If he reads Chapter 11, the average student will do well on this exam.*
Nonsexist: *If you read Chapter 11, you will do well on this exam.*

2. Use first person (*I, we*) if appropriate.
Sexist: *If a professor expects his students to do well, they probably will do well.*
Nonsexist: *If we as professors expect our students to do well, they probably will do well.*

3. Eliminate the pronoun.
Sexist: *Each of the secretaries may decide which call she will answer first.*
Nonsexist: *Each of the secretaries may decide which call to answer first.*

4. Replace pronouns with articles (*a, an, the*).
Sexist: *Not one of my tutees brought his textbook with him.*
Nonsexist: *Not one of my tutees brought a textbook to the session.*

5. Use plural nouns and pronouns.
Sexist: *Take the average student, for instance. He is intimidated by the writing process.*
Nonsexist: *Most students are intimidated by the writing process.*
Sexist: *The instructor should always establish his own guidelines concerning late papers.*
Nonsexist: *Instructors should always establish their own guidelines concerning late papers.*

6. Alternate female and male pronouns throughout the text. For example, if you refer to teachers, students, or administrators as males in one sentence, paragraph, or section of a paper or speech, refer to them as females in another sentence, paragraph, or section.

7. Use both male and female pronouns and vary their order.
Sexist: *A university dean has a yearly budget at his disposal.*
Nonsexist: *A university dean has a yearly budget at his or her disposal.*
Sexist: *If a department head wants to increase the amount in one line of his departmental budget, he must follow the proper channels.*
Nonsexist: *If a department head wants to increase the amount in one line of the departmental budget, she or he must follow the proper channels.*

Note: Avoid monotonous repetition of **he/she, his/her, he or she,** or **his or her** by choosing other alternatives much of the time.

8. Use specific, genderless nouns.
Sexist: *The typical man on the street wants to speak his mind on political issues.*
Nonsexist: *The typical voter wants to speak out on political issues.*

9. Substitute job titles or descriptions for "generic" pronouns.
Sexist: *The man we hire must know something about boilers.*
Nonsexist: *The engineer we hire must know something about boilers.*
Sexist: *We are looking for a new dental hygienist. She must be able to begin work immediately.*
Nonsexist: *We are looking for a new dental hygienist who can begin work immediately.* OR: *We are looking for a new dental hygienist. The person we hire must be able to begin work immediately.*

10. Repeat the noun, rephrase, or use a synonym.
Sexist: *The professor who suspects that a student is cheating may use his prerogative in dealing with him.*
Nonsexist: *The professor who suspects that a student is cheating may decide how to handle the situation.*

11. Avoid generalizing an animal's sex.
Sexist: *Watch that rat. That's the third time he's rung the bell to get the cheese.*
Nonsexist: *Watch that rat. That's the third time it has rung the bell to get the cheese.*
Nonsexist: *That rabbit just had a litter. She can't be pregnant again already!*

(Note that neither nations nor nature, boats, cars, or other inanimate objects have gender.)

NOUNS, VERBS, AND ADJECTIVES: All Women and Men Are Created Equal.

Concerning the use of *man* to refer to both males and females, lexicographer Alma Graham notes:

> If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is "Man overboard!" If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is "manslaughter." If she is injured on the job, the coverage [still in many states] is "workmen's compensation." But if she arrives at a threshold marked "Men Only," she knows the admonition is not intended to bar animals or plants or inanimate objects. It is meant for her. (quoted in Miller and Swift, 25)

Using *man* to refer to people of both sexes is sexist. Such usage implies that the male gender is the norm and can refer to everyone. To those who argue that *man* refers to all people, one has only to invoke the United States Constitution, in which *man* means *men*, and *men* means *males*; women were not granted equal rights within the Constitution. There are many other ways in which so-called generic terms for human beings have been used to render women linguistically—and therefore culturally—invisible.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the supposedly generic *man*. Again, however, not every alternative fits every situation; choose an alternative that fits your context.

1. Substitute specific nouns that express what you really mean.

Sexist	*Nonsexist*
men, manpower	*labor, human resources, human energy, work force, personnel*
man-hours	*staff time, work hours*
man on the street, common man, average man	*person on the street, common person, voter, citizen, worker, etc.*
brotherhood of man	*human bond, humankind, humanity*

2. Use encompassing nouns.

Sexist	*Nonsexist*
man/men, mankind	*humans, humankind, person(s), people, human race, women and men, someone, anyone*
modern man	*modern civilization, the modern age, people today*
black man	*black people, blacks, black men and women*
white man	*Caucasians, white settlers, etc.*
Englishmen	*the English, the British, English citizens*
working man	*workers, wage earners*
workmen's compensation	*workers' compensation (this is the correct legal term in Ohio)*
manned spacecraft	*occupied spacecraft, spacecraft with people aboard, etc.*

3. Add women.

Sexist	*Nonsexist*
Man is a dreamer.	*Men and women are dreamers.*

4. Use other verbs.

Sexist	*Nonsexist*
to man (a booth, etc.)	*work, cover, run, staff, steer, occupy, take, supply personnel for, operate*
to manhandle	*subdue, force, handle roughly*

5. Use parallel terms for men and women.

Sexist	*Nonsexist*
men and girls	*men and women*
Lady Penguins	*Penguins*

HANDLING SEXIST QUOTATIONS

If the material you want to quote is sexist, you may (1) paraphrase the exact quotation, (2) paraphrase the sexist portion of the quotation, or (3) add words in brackets. Keep the entire quotation only if your point is to *show* the author's sexist language or attitudes.

Original quotation

Jack Smith, author of Solving Your Discipline Problems, *argues, "If you take your discipline problems to the principal, he will think you are not capable of handling them yourself" (393).*

Possible approaches

Complete paraphrase: *According to Jack Smith, author of* Solving Your Discipline Problems, *principals do not respect teachers who ask them to solve their discipline problems (393).*

Paraphrase of sexist portion: *Jack Smith, author of* Solving Your Discipline Problems, *argues, "If you take your discipline problems to the principal," the principal "will think you are not capable of handling them yourself" (393).*

Changes in brackets: *According to Jack Smith, author of* Solving Your Discipline Problems, *"If you take your discipline problems to the principal, he [or she] will think you are not capable of handling them yourself" (393).*

WORK-RELATED TITLES

Many professional titles and workplace terms exclude women; others patronize and belittle women. Gender-specific titles reinforce assumptions that restrict women and men to stereotypical roles, inaccurately identify people, and promote false images of people's lives and work.

The U.S. Department of Labor has taken on the task of eliminating sexism from its comprehensive *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, available in any library.

Many people have objected to removing sexism from job titles on the basis that the result grates on the ear. We must keep in mind, first, that what "sounds right" does so only because we are accustomed to it and, second, that in many cases the problem can be solved in other ways. Some examples of nonsexist alternatives are listed below, but there are many others, of course. Finding alternatives, if approached with an inquiring mindset, can provide hours of stimulating exercise.

1. Replace language suggesting that certain kinds of jobs are "men's" work, as well as language stereotyping or belittling men or suggesting that all work is done by men.

Sexist	***Nonsexist***
best man for the job	*best person for the job*
businessman	*businessperson/people, entrepreneur, executive, manager, merchant, industrialist, people in business*

deliveryman/boy	*delivery clerk, driver, porter, courier, messenger*
beliman	*porter, bellhop*
cameraman	*camera operator, photographer, videotaper*
chairman	*chair, chairperson, moderator, department head, presiding officer*
congressman/men	*member of Congress, representative, congresswomen and congressmen, senator*
craftsman	*craft worker, artisan, craftsperson*
draftsman	*drafter*
fireman	*firefighter*
freshman	*first-year student, entry level (e.g., entry-level courses)*
foreman	*crew leader, supervisor*
guys	*men, people, young men*
headmaster	*principal*
kingpin	*key person, leader*
mailman	*letter carrier, postal worker*
male nurse	*nurse*
man-hours	*staff time, work time, labor, time*
manmade	*artificial, synthetic, simulated, machine-made, handmade, built by hand*
middleman	*intermediary*
newsman/men	*reporter(s), journalist(s)*
night watchman	*night guard, security guard*
paperboy	*paper carrier*
policeman	*police officer*
pressman	*press operator*
repairman, handyman	*repairer (or better: plumber, electrician, carpenter, etc.)*
salesman/men	*sales representative, salesperson, sales agent, sales force*
spokesman	*spokesperson, representative, advocate, proponent*
sportsman	*sports/outdoor enthusiast (better: fisher, hunter, canoer, etc.)*
statesman	*diplomat, political leader, public servant*
steward/stewardess	*flight attendant*
weatherman	*meteorologist, weather reporter*
workmen	*workers*

2. Replace titles that stereotype, belittle, patronize, or unnecessarily single out women (i.e., those that call attention to their sex).

Sexist	Nonsexist
actress	*actor, player*
authoress	*author, writer*
aviatrix	*pilot*
better half	*spouse*
career girl/woman	*professor, engineer, mathematician, administrative assistant, secretary, etc.*
coed	*student*
girl	*woman (female 18 or over), young woman (girl should be used only for a child)*
girl Friday	*assistant, secretary (better: full name)*
housewife	*homemaker*
maid, cleaning lady	*housekeeper, custodian, houseworker*
poetess	*poet*
sculptress	*sculptor*
usherette	*usher*
waitress	*server ("Oh, Miss" could be replaced by "Excuse me" or another nongender-specific expression)*

3. Use parallel terms to introduce or refer to men and women at all meetings and public functions.
Sexist: *"Let me introduce the new department chairs: Dr. Samuel Taylor, History; Dr. Gary Stephens, Home Economics; and Mary, Marketing."*
Nonsexist: *"Let me introduce the new department chairs: Dr. Samuel Taylor, History; Dr. Mary Evans, Marketing; and Dr. Gary Stephens, Home Economics."*

4. List staff, committee members, or other groups alphabetically or by job titles, if appropriate.
Sexist: *Members of the Task Force on Sexism*

George Ketchworth
Victor Wan-Tatah
Bege Bowers
Joan Phillipp
Jean Engle
Danna Bozick

Nonsexist: *Members of the Task Force on Sexism*

Bege Bowers
Danna Bozick
Jean Engle
George Letchworth
Joan Philipp
Victor Wan-Tatah

COURTESY TITLES

Courtesy titles are sexist when they reveal a woman's marital status or render her an unnamed appendage of her husband. The titles *Miss* and *Mrs.* define a woman by her relation to a man. If she is a *Miss*, she has no husband; if she's a *Mrs.*, she does or did have one. In either case, a woman's marital status is not—and should not be—her defining characteristic in the world, any more than a man's is.

Of course, this is not the best of all possible worlds, and as we traverse the tricky ground toward gender equality, not everyone will agree about what direction to take. Ideally, we might eliminate courtesy titles altogether, but not all forms of address would be acceptable in this form. So, for the time being, we recommend the following relatively nonsexist approach:

Use Mr. *for all men.*
Use Ms. *for all women.*
Use a woman's first name, not her husband's.
Use parallel terms for men and women.

Recommended Forms of Address and Corresponding Salutations:

On the left are some ways you might start the address on an envelope; on the right, are suggestions for beginning the corresponding letter:

Outside Address	**Corresponding Salutation**
Mr. John Smith Ms. Joan Smith	Dear Mr. and Ms. Smith:
Dr. Joan Allen and Mr. John Smith	Dear Dr. Allen and Mr. Smith:
Ms. Joan and Mr. John Smith	Dear Ms. and Mr. Smith:

Parallel terms: William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, or Faulkner and Welty, NOT Faulkner and Miss Welty.

Using or preparing *mailing lists*, phone directories, and the like presents particular challenges to nonsexist communication. Most lists and directories follow a sexist format, listing women separately only if they are not married to men. If you choose this format, you are buying into the sexist idea that the male forms the unit, while other members of the household are mere satellites of him.

It is equally sexist to assume that if a man's name appears on the list, you can address your communication to Mr. and Mrs. _____. By doing so, you may be making any of several errors, aside from treating the woman as a nonperson: (1) The listed man may be single. (2) A couple may be married, but the woman may have retained her original name. (3) A man and a woman may be living together and not be married. (4) The household may include several other adults, married or unmarried. (5) The name listed may not be a man's name at all, but a woman's. In any of these instances, you run the risk of offending someone and, in so doing, losing your audience.

Here are a few suggestions for dealing with the mailing list/directory situation:

Outside Address	***Corresponding Salutation***
John Jones and Others	*Dear Mr. Jones and Others:*
John Jones and Any Others at 1818 7th Street	*Dear Residents:*
Mr. John Jones/Others	*Dear Mr. Jones/Others:*

In cases in which you don't know the name and/or gender of the recipient, don't make the sexist assumption that the person is a male. Avoid "Dear Sir" or "Dear Sir/Madam." Below are some neutral alternatives:

Outside Address	***Corresponding Salutation***
[Name of Business/Organization]	*Dear Director, Dear Staffperson, etc.:*
Addressee(s)	*Dear Addressee(s):*
Resident(s)	*Dear Resident(s):*
Chris Cratt	*Dear C. Cratt:*

Additional Guidelines for Nonsexist Communication in the Classroom and Elsewhere in the University Community

Research reported in the sources listed at the end of this report suggests that women and men have differing styles of presentation and participation (with men being more aggressive and confident, women more tentative and self-questioning) and that people do not respond in the same manner to the differing styles. Likewise,

> nonverbal and other behaviors can . . . help shape classroom climate. A professor's nonverbal behavior can signal inclusion or exclusion of group members; indicate interest and attention o[r] the opposite; communicate expectation of students' success or failure; and foster or impede students' confidence in their own abilities to learn specific tasks and procedures. (Hall and Sandler, 6)

Faculty, staff, administrators, and students must be careful to treat, address, and respond to men and women equally. Thus, we offer the following guidelines in addition to those listed above.

1. Make sure groups are heterogeneous and duties are assigned equally.
Construct committees composed of both men and women. Likewise, avoid grouping students, or allowing students to group themselves, by sex. Don't always make women the "secretaries" and men the "chairs" in group work. Point out to students that such splits reinforce stereotypical behaviors. Choose women as well as men leaders in labs. Gender-based distribution of responsibilities reinforces sexist stereotypes.

2. In the classroom, or elsewhere, look at both women and men (not just men) when you speak, lecture, or ask a question.
If you make eye contact with men only, women may feel that you aren't speaking to them or that you don't expect them to respond. As a result, women may not participate as often or as much as men.

3. Call on both men and women for answers to "higher order" questions.
Some instructors ask women the "lower order" questions (those requiring simple, factual answers, such as "Who wrote *Middlemarch*?"), reserving "higher order" questions (those requiring more complex critical thinking skills, such as "How do the theories of Piaget and Erickson compare?") for men. Such differentiation is sexist; it fosters the notion that women are not capable of answering the more difficult questions.

4. Respond with equal enthusiasm, patience and attentiveness to women and men. Call both men and women by name.
Calling primarily on men, or gesturing or nodding in response to men's comments while responding passively to those of women, may encourage men more than women and suggest that women's comments are less valuable than those of men. Encourage women, as well as men, to develop their answers or comments further.

5. Give credit where credit is due. Credit women as "authors" or thinkers just as you do men.
Make statements such as the following: "As Larry said, . . . "; "Sue made an important point."

6. Examine your patterns of interaction to make sure that you do not interrupt women more than men.
Constantly interrupting women suggests that their comments are not important. And never interrupt women or men to comment on their physical appearance.

7. Refrain from statements that reflect preconceptions about men's or women's abilities.
Avoid sexist statements such as the following: "Women don't belong in a chemistry lab," "Women are fuzzy thinkers," "Women can't play football," "Men don't make good nurses," "Women aren't aggressive enough to be deans." Also, don't attribute one student's success to "luck" while praising another for "skill."

Likewise, in written or spoken descriptions, do not stereotype by valuing men only for their accomplishments and women only for their physical attributes.

8. Treat all students as serious students, all instructors as serious instructors.
Don't be guilty of assuming that women are in college to find husbands, athletes are in college to play sports, women are teaching only to supplement family income, etc. Again, such assumptions reinforce stereotypes.

In addition, be very careful to avoid sexist references to physical attributes when writing letters of recommendation. There is no need to indicate that "Susan is very attractive" or "John is a handsome young man" if such attributes have nothing to do with the position in question.

9. Review all materials and texts for gender bias.
If you must choose materials that include sexist language or attitudes, point out the problems and discuss them with whoever uses the materials. Examine texts to see that women as well as men authors are represented and that research reputed to have general implications is based on both male and female subjects.

10. Never tell sexist jokes in the University setting. Period.
So-called humor that demeans or belittles women (or men), that focuses on physical characteristics, or recalls stereotypes is not funny. Such jokes, cartoons, and remarks are detrimental to the educational process.

Additional Guidelines for Nonsexist Communication in Visuals

Pictures and graphics can have a great impact on the reader or perceiver; many direct and indirect messages may be conveyed. Thus, it is very important to examine visual material for its subtleties and overall effect. There are no strict rules, but the guidelines presented here will help in evaluating visuals and selecting material that is nonsexist.

Do:

1. *Show both genders in various roles as faculty, staff, administrators, and students.*
2. *Show men and women equally in dominant roles.*
3. *Break stereotypes by showing women and men in nontraditional fields.*
4. *Avoid the use of male pronouns when referring to all students or a group of male and female students. (Magnified on a poster or sign, the so-called generic* he or his *can be particularly damaging: "THE STUDENT IS OUR BUSINESS. HIS COMFORT IS OUR MAJOR CONCERN.")*
5. *Look for the cumulative effects when a number of pictures are involved. Are there mostly people of one gender in the dominant roles, and are those shown in submissive roles mostly the opposite gender?*

Don't:

1. *Show men in all the leadership roles (e.g., the teacher) and women in the subordinate roles (e.g., the student).*
2. *Show only men in administrative roles and women in supportive roles (e.g., doctor/nurse).*
3. *Depict women predominantly in service jobs.*
4. *Use sexist pictures or slides (or comments) as attention-getters or to enliven a dull lecture.*
5. *Use attractive women or men merely to "decorate" a slide or poster.*
6. *Show women with a lot of skin showing while men remain clothed.*
7. *Show males as athletic or vigorously active and females as sedentary spectators or in support roles (e.g., cheerleaders).*
8. *Show only young women in pictures while men of all ages are shown.*

The pictures in Figures 1-5, most of which are common "clip art" available for use on campus, reflect some of the DOs and DON'Ts of visual representation.

Figure 1

Avoid Picturing Females and Males Only in Stereotypical Roles

The picture on the left depicts a stereotypical woman's role. A demonstration of domestic duties in the absence of other endeavors perpetuates a unidimensional view of women.

The picture on the right depicts a stereotypical man's role. The hard-working professional male in the absence of males in other roles maintains a unidimensional view of men.

Figure 2

Picture Males and Females in Nonstereotypical Roles

The picture on the left depicts a male serving the meal while the female and child sit at the table.

The picture on the right depicts a woman participating in conditioning activities.

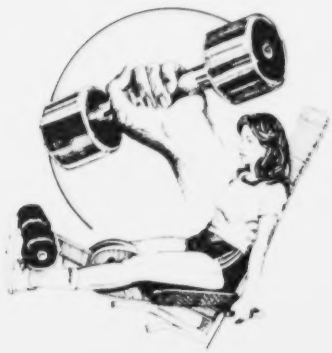

Figure 3

Professional Groups I

This all-male professional group is a stereotypical depiction of male dominance. It neglects an opportunity to show affirmative action or female role models.

This professional group of various ages and sexes promotes affirmative action and shows multiple role models.

Figure 4

Professional Groups II

The sexist picture of professional people interacting (left) depicts the woman in a flirtatious pose while the men are protective of her or serious in demeanor.

The nonsexist professional grouping on the right shows women and men working together in a cooperative effort.

Figure 5

Do Not Use Pictures of Women to "Decorate" Visual Material or to Grab Attention

Irrelevant use of female as "attention-getter" in this car advertisement

Recommendations for Raising Awareness Throughout the University Community

Members of the Task Force will be happy to help implement any of the following recommendations:

1. Publicize and support the report of the Task Force on Sexism in Communication through the President's "State of the University" address this fall, in the Academic Senate, and in *The Lambar.*

2. Publish the report as a handbook.

3. Issue a statement indicating the inappropriateness of sexist comments, sexist humor, and other forms of sexist or discriminatory communication in the classroom or elsewhere in the University. Include the statement in materials distributed to all new faculty, staff, students, and trustees. Publicize the statement at the new-faculty orientation each fall.

4. Distribute copies of the Guidelines to all publications, offices, and departments on campus.

5. Encourage all department and section heads to make it known that these should be followed in all communication by all members of the University community.

6. Encourage the English Department to include a unit on sexist communication in all Composition I (English 550) classes.

7. Encourage teachers of all introductory-level courses to include a unit on sexist attitudes and communication in their own particular fields.

8. Conduct staff and faculty development workshops on nonsexist communication.

9. Conduct annual workshops on nonsexist communication for all new teaching assistants (University-wide or by department).

10. Encourage advisors and Career Services to offer nonsexist advice concerning courses, programs, and careers. Add an explicit statement on sexism to the Advising Manual.

11. Encourage the Counseling Center and/or Women's Resource Center to conduct workshops on differing styles of class participation and communication.

12. Add a question or questions on sexism and racism to the student evaluation forms. Encourage department heads to talk with instructors who repeatedly score poorly on such questions.

13. Provide videotaping for teachers and speakers who wish to be videotaped, and provide a mechanism for them to discuss the videotape with someone knowledgeable about sexist communication.

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